

NOTES ON SOME INDIAN BIRDS.

BY

E. H. N. LOWTHER, M.B.O.U., F.Z.S.

VIII—BY TANK AND JHIL.

(With 12 plates from photographs by the author).

(Continued from page 401 of Vol. xliii. No. 3).

A tank or pond, formed by the earth having been removed to make the homes of the simple folk that constitute the majority of India's four hundred millions, occurs on the outskirts of many a village throughout the length and breadth of the land. Overlooking these tanks one or more large trees frequently have their roots—generally *pipal*, *banyan*, *tamarind* or *nim*. To these, often, a number of species of birds resort for nesting purposes, as soon as the south-west monsoon breaks, towards the end of June. Where one village gives sanctuary to openbill storks, with, perhaps, some cattle egrets and pond herons nesting on a neighbouring tree, another is favoured only by white ibises, while a third may act as host to one or two pairs of grey herons and darters, and a few spoonbills. A fourth, again, may have its trees tenanted by a number of species, including little cormorants, little and lesser egrets and, later, a considerable colony of painted storks.

It is at 'heronries' such as I have described that my observations have been made and my photographs taken; and if these miniature heronries lack the grandeur of such famous waterfowl breeding haunts as the Keoladeo Ghana in Bharatpur State, they possess this advantage that the observer, having fewer species before him, is in a better position to watch each more closely than might be the case if there were several. Withal he will find that he has not a single dull moment, that something is happening the whole time, whether he be studying the birds with field glasses from the comfortable ease of a *charpoy* kindly produced for his special benefit by some villager, or photographing them from the shelter of a *hide*.

But let us go back a little; let us try and obtain a picture of what the Indian plains look like, *feel* like, at this season of the year; of how the average mortal fares.

It has been a real 'corker' of a hot weather and the maximum shade temperature recorded 122.6 degrees. At times the *loo*—the burning, scorching wind so dreaded in the United Provinces—has blown throughout the night as well as during the long hours of daylight. Indians have been going about with cloths to their faces, mouth, ears and nose stuffed up so that the heat shall not enter into their bodies. No wonder the oldest resident is said to have remarked that he had not known a hot weather like unto this during the fifty-five years he has lived in our station. The countryside is as

bare and brown as can be; not a blade of grass for the painfully lean kine, many of which succumb to these famine conditions. Ponds and *jhils* have long since dried up and a number of sarus cranes whose beats are familiar to us, have betaken themselves elsewhere, possibly to the river's margin; there, I fear, to eke out a frugal living. Other marsh birds also are absent from their wonted haunts. Man too has been hard put to it and many a good soul—European as well as Indian—has been removed from our midst by the Great Reaper.

We tell ourselves this cruel heat cannot last; we look forward with the keenest anticipation to the 25th of June when (so the Old Stagers say) the monsoon may be expected to break. At last, when we are at the extreme end of our tether, clouds gather, and on the 24th afternoon the rain comes down in buckets and continues to do so till the late evening. (The Old 'Uns knew what they were talking about, after all). For the next two days we are treated to real monsoon weather and where before the countryside looked the abomination of desolation, everything is now a lovely, fresh green, and the new-grown grass soon provides luscious keep to starving cattle. Man no longer suffers the tortures of prickly heat as he did a few days ago, and once more is fit to apply himself with zeal to 'the daily round, the common task'. The altered weather conditions have not passed unnoticed by the feathered world either—even in our gardens a marked change is at once noted. Where previously the ashy wren-warbler slid about quietly in the bushes, he now proclaims his presence; and there is a ring in his notes which suggests the joy of living. Tailor birds *to-weet-to-weet* louder than ever, and pied mynahs add their cheerful notes to the bird chorus. The house crow more than any other species hails with unalloyed delight the advent of the monsoon. At once he and his mate have busied themselves with domestic duties and on all sides now their stick nests are to be seen.

But it is not of garden birds I would write: let us instead visit one of the heronries described earlier, one that has been in existence for years and was referred to many decades back in Hume's *Nests and Eggs of Indian Birds*. It is occupied entirely by white ibises, of which there cannot be less than one hundred pairs in residence. But the 'mighty tamarind tree' of which Major Bingham wrote, no longer exists. We are told it was blown down twenty-five or thirty years ago, since when the white ibis have made their nests on two *pipal* trees on either side of the Grand Trunk road, on the outskirts of the village: such is the attachment of this species to an old breeding haunt. We learn also that the tree in question was used by these birds for nesting purposes right up to the end and that it crashed in the cold weather when the ibis were no longer concerned with family cares: which was fortunate, as if they had been nesting at the time the probability is that this village would have been abandoned by the birds as a breeding haunt.

Before we reach our 'ibisery' we know we must be in the neighbourhood of one because numbers of birds fly across our

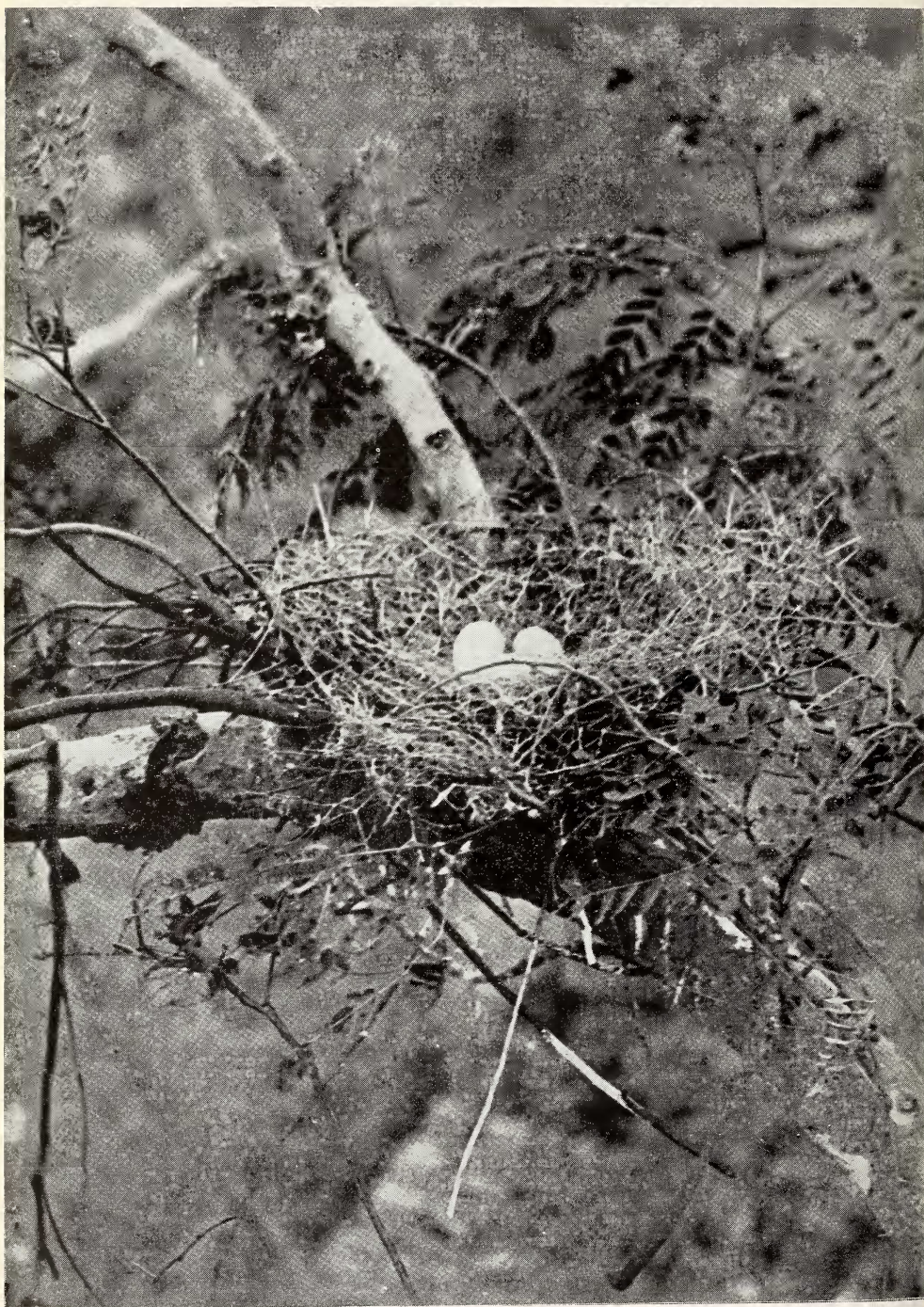


Photo by

E. H. N. Lowther

Nest of the Indian Black Ibis.
Pseudibis papillosus Temm.
88' above ground.

field of vision with twigs in their beaks. On arrival at the site we find that although nesting operations are well in hand not a single ibis is sitting on eggs. We note that the fine sticks or twigs with which the nests are being made, are almost always brought in by one bird—from some distance too, methinks, as they are from *babool* trees, of which there is not an example within a considerable radius of the village—while the other remains at the nest, to incorporate each addition in the structure. *Very rarely* both birds bring materials to the nest; even then only one seems to be concerned actively with its construction. The majority of nests are in the most exposed parts of the tree, open to the sky; quite a few, however, rest on the lower branches, and are therefore more sheltered.

When next we visit the breeding colony we do not see a single pair of ibises engaged on nest construction. On every nest—they are small for the side of the bird, about ten inches in diameter—the females are now sitting hard, their mates often besides them, but absent in the majority of cases, the loose skin below the chin vibrating at an alarming rate in this humid, hot-house atmosphere. Inspection of a number of nests shows that they each contain three eggs, very light green in colour, without any markings, in size about 2.5" × 1.7".

The garb of some of the ibis at this colony interests us greatly. Two males, with white-feathered necks, stand by their wives. Can it be that the white ibis does not acquire the adult plumage until after the second or third moult? Or are these birds of the year, born in South India, where nesting takes place very early in the year? Another bird has a bare, red triangular marking on the head, the feature so characteristic of the black ibis. Yet another has the head *completely* red.

The white ibis, though normally an unusually silent species, is guilty of producing at the nesting tree a subdued, asthmatic grunt. The young too, like young egrets and the young of the different species of heron, keep up an incessant, quickly repeated, *chick-chick* chatter throughout the live-long day, and even during the hours of darkness; in the latter case this portends the arrival of a parent with food. When well-feathered the call becomes a piping squeal, uttered at meal times. The young are fed by regurgitation, the parent bringing the black-looking food up to the tip of the mandibles and giving this very tenderly to the callow brood. When they are a little older the chicks help themselves to the 'pigeon's milk' by putting their bills into the adult's beak and obtaining what they want at its base. This seems rather a rough process and the attempts of three young ones to feed simultaneously can obviously prove painful to the old birds, judging by the manner in which the parent ibis sometimes turns its back on the offspring and hurriedly leaves the nest, after a youngster has made an extra violent jab to obtain more food.

The nestling white ibis has a white downy body, black head and neck, pink feet, and the slightly curved bill similarly coloured. The young, when they go out into the world, lack the red membrane under the wing, the feature so characteristic of the adult,

One might imagine that as the white ibis is such a marsh-loving species the black ibis must be similarly inclined. Such, however, is not the case, the two species going their different ways. True, in the winter months the black ibis is often to be seen in canal beds, where the squidgy silt seems to provide it with an abundance of food, but normally it haunts fallow land and the edge of cultivation, subsisting either on insects, or on any grain it can pick up. I have even seen it seize a frog. In their breeding arrangements also the two species differ, the black ibis nesting singly though it is not averse to other species making their homes in the same tree. Nor is the presence of water necessary for this purpose—indeed the nest is usually built well away from marshy ground, though it is, perhaps, most often placed on some *seesum* tree by a canal bank. It is constructed from fine twigs, has a marked depression and is invariably built at a great height—that figured here was eighty-eight feet from the ground. The eggs, usually three in number, are very pale blue in colour and average $2.45'' \times 1.7''$ in size.

Not only do the white and black ibis differ in their nesting and with regard to their general habits but there are marked differences *inter se*. Whereas the white ibis has the head and neck devoid of feathers, only the head and nape are bare in the case of its black relation. The black ibis' head, moreover, has pitted or tattooed on it, a large, deep red triangular mark. In addition its legs are brick-red in colour and it utters a screaming, clanging note, both when flying and perched. At the roost this species is sometimes very noisy.

The next heronry we visit is occupied mainly by openbill storks, of which there must be at least forty pairs nesting on the old *banyan* tree.

As storks go the openbill is a small bird, standing about two and a half feet in height. At the beginning of the breeding season the plumage is white, with much black in the wings, and the tail black also, the black glossed dark green and purple. About a fortnight or so after the eggs have hatched, the white begins to change to a sullied grey. The legs are long and of a flesh colour. But it is the bird's bill which is most striking and unlike anything we know—when it is closed it is open! This is not really the case, of course, as the tips of the mandibles meet. The bill, however, has the appearance of being open of the prominent gap from about its centre to nearly the tip of the mandibles.

Even now we do not know why the openbill stork's beak is so fashioned.

The openbills are all incubating their eggs and either give us a dirty look as we examine them closely with the glasses, or take no notice of us. From time to time a member of the colony comes in to the nesting tree, dropping its legs and then opening and depressing the tail before finally settling. Owing to a gale that is blowing, one alights too near a neighbouring lesser egret's nest, whose outraged owner *quarks* menacingly and then jabs its dagger-like bill at the trespasser, who is glad to remove his offending presence, to avoid real trouble. Both sexes incubate by day, the one off duty

frequently standing by the nest and preening itself very thoroughly for long minutes at a stretch. Then, often, the bird departs suddenly, sometimes merely to fly in wide and ever increasing circles over the heronry, or disappearing out of sight, probably to attend to the 'inner man'.

The nests are considerably larger than those of the white ibis and differ also from those of that species in being lined with lumps of dry grass, or small twigs with leaves still attached. These are added to from time to time as incubation advances; more particularly does this occur during the fortnight after the young first make their appearance. Up to five eggs are laid, creamy-white at first but soon turning to a muddy-brown.

After the eggs have hatched a tree tenanted by a number of nesting openbills is most emphatically one to avoid, especially on a wet day; the branches and foliage are then covered with *guano* and the stench is over-powering.

Painted storks nest later than the majority of species dealt with in this article, the time of their breeding depending on whether the monsoon is a bad or good one; if the former, the pelican-ibis (as the bird was known in Hume's time) begins to build its nest high up in a *pipal* tree about the end of August. When the rains have been good, nesting operations are deferred for a fortnight or three weeks, so that we may expect to find young in the nest even during the first half of December. Sometimes, however, the monsoon fails completely. When this has been the case, I have known spoonbills and painted storks, as well as white ibises and sarus cranes, make no attempt to bring up families. Of course, it may be argued that the birds betook themselves elsewhere, where conditions were more favourable for nesting purposes. I am sure such was not the case as there was no falling off in numbers among the resident birds during the months that they should have been nesting, throughout a long stretch of country extending roughly from Benares to Delhi, with which, for many years, I was thoroughly familiar.

It is nothing unusual to find thirty or more painted storks' nests in the one tree. These are about the same size as those of the openbill. Some are considerably smaller. The nests are made of fine twigs, and almost, invariably lined with long, coarse grass or weeds which the birds pull up from the shallow water or its margin. Both sexes share in building the nest, incubating the eggs and feeding the young. Three, four or even five eggs are laid, dull white in colour and about 2.8" × 1.9" in size.

I have photographed the painted stork by the simple if trying method of climbing a nesting tree and chasing the bird about with a reflex camera, but the pictures obtained are not particularly pleasing, lacking that *something* which makes all the difference between a good and a mediocre picture. It is far more satisfactory to study the bird from a *hide* super-imposed on a lofty *machan* built up against a convenient tree, a remark which applies equally to all these tree-nesting marshland species. The construction of a suitable watch-tower will involve considerable labour and expense, but the trouble taken will be amply repaid by the results obtained and the observations made possible from the hiding tent.

Painted storks return quickly to their nests and can be studied at ease. What a pulse-quickening picture the bird presents as it arrives with a crash to feed its young—no grunt, no vocal sound, though often the mandibles are clapped together, particularly if the mate be at the nest, when both birds sometimes bow to each other and then raise their bodies and heads, perhaps repeating the performance two, three or four times before assuming a nonchalant pose. The young, who in the meantime have been attending to their toilet, fighting among themselves, or just doing nothing, now galvanised into action, worry the adult bird, bobbing up and down and spreading their wings. Soon their wants are attended to, the parent stork putting its bill down so that the tips of the mandibles rest on, or almost on, the floor of the nest. After a little effort, when the bill is opened wide, giving the impression that the bird is going to be sick, up—or should I say down?—come a dozen or more *chilwa* or other small fry which are promptly swallowed whole by the young. Should, however, the catch have been something more substantial, a nine- or ten-inch sized fish for instance, greater effort may be required to disgorge the meal. The wings then come into play a good deal, while the bill is opened wider and the neck shaken, before 'vomiting' occurs. A great scramble ensues for the prize, which changes from beak to beak frequently, before disappearing down a storkling's throat, not however, without some difficulty. Then, satisfied, the fortunate youngster rests on its *tarsi* till the ample repast has been well and truly digested. Sometimes it happens that in the competition to secure such a fine mouthful the fish is knocked over the nest. Though lost to the young birds it must not be supposed that the parent stork's angling has been a fruitless venture as Chamar children wait for and collect these 'blessings from above' and eat them, thereby demonstrating that very little is allowed to be wasted in this 'Land we live in'. Mongooses and *pi* dogs too take their quota of the windfalls, the storks making no effort to retrieve any food that drops overboard.

We have two other resident storks, the white-necked and the black-necked. Neither nests in colonies, though the former sometimes shares the same tree with egrets or even an odd grey heron. Its nest, usually built at a considerable height from the ground, is a flattish structure of sticks and twigs, with leaves often used as lining. Three to five eggs are laid, of the usual stork colour.

In northern India, white-necked storks' nests with fresh eggs may be found towards the end of May. The breeding season is prolonged, as I have come across hard-set eggs at the end of July, and young still in the nest, two months later. I cannot say from personal knowledge whether both sexes incubate but they both certainly help in constructing the nest and later feeding the young. Feeding time—when the young are well grown there is often an interval of two or three hours between meals—is anxiously looked forward to by the storklings, and either parent, as soon as it alights at the nest, is set on by the young who endeavour to grasp the adult's beak what time the old bird does its best to 'bring up' from its capacious maw a pish-pash of digested remains



Photo by

White-necked Stork

E. H. N. Lowther



Black-necked Stork

of frogs, fish, possibly a snake, and other such savoury items. When the photograph reproduced here was taken the five young ones were almost ready to leave the nursery. They were not fed individually, the brownish-looking 'porridge' regurgitated by the adult being deposited instead in the bed of the nest. Unappetising, indeed revolting though it looked to me, the young, obviously, considered the meal provided 'good tucker', judging by the manner in which they jostled each other to get at it; in fact the way they 'scrummed' would have done credit to a first class 'rugger' side.

The black-necked stork is a large and remarkably handsome bird, black and white in general appearance, with much green and purple glossing, long coral-coloured legs, and a colossal black beak—about twelve inches in length. It does not nest around village tanks but on the summit of some gigantic *pipal* tree standing by itself in the middle of cultivation, frequently at a considerable distance from water. The nest, a huge affair, three to five feet in width, is made of quite substantial twigs, with finer twigs and dry grass for lining, the twigs and branches invariably of a thorny nature. Three to five creamy-white eggs are laid, in size about 2.90" by 2.10".

The photograph of the black-necked stork alighting at its nest having earned some notoriety—it was *hung* at the International Exhibition of Nature Photography held towards the end of 1935 at the South Kensington Natural History Museum, London, and appeared in *Nature in the Wild* (Country Life) which was advertised as containing the World's finest nature photographs—it will not be out of place to explain how it was obtained.

The nest was situated exactly sixty feet from the ground, and was built on the crown of a *pipal* tree growing alongside the Lower Ganges canal a few miles distant from Etawah. An upturned table was secured at the top of the tree, on a level with the nest and only seventeen feet away from it. This served both as a platform for myself and the camera, and provided the necessary supports for the *hide*.

The tent, camouflaged on the outside with branches from the tree, was left *in situ* for a number of days before photography was attempted.

In all I spent twenty-eight hours, spread over a period of five days, studying and photographing this black-necked stork. During the whole of my vigil the male neither visited the nest nor were the young fed at all. (It is a simple matter to distinguish between the male and female; the latter has a lovely golden-coloured eye, while the male's is dark brown, almost black). The female stood on the nest throughout, not once attempting to brood. Certainly she flew away occasionally, as a rule after I had made enough noise to awaken the dead; otherwise she did exactly nothing except watch her two children playing on the nest—tug-of-war with a very dead and dried-up frog.

Not far away, on another *pipal* tree, was a Pallas' fishing eagle's nest. On the rare occasions that the black-necked stork was absent from her nest, the male eagle circled round the stork's tree and twice I had to go all out to prevent it removing one of

the young storks. The presence of only two nestlings was probably due to the eagle having previously carried off one or more of the squabs.

My observations lead me to believe that young black-necked storks are fed only between sunset and sunrise. Probably both parents share in this task.

As one watches a party of spoonbills working a strip of shallow, inundated ground, the slightly open bill sweeping right and left alternately, one cannot help regretting that this species no longer breeds in Britain. It did so, in the Fenland, until about three hundred years ago, and to this day nests regularly in Holland. Why then did the bird desert its ancient breeding stronghold in East Anglia? It is difficult to believe that this was due to drainage—the excuse too often put forward to explain the disappearance of a rare species. Far more likely the spoonbill's disappearance as a British breeding species was due to persecution during many generations at the hands of our forefathers, the memory of which has been handed down through the centuries. Clearly the 'good old days' were 'not good enough'; which is a pity as the spoonbill is a grand fowl. It is, however, shy and does not allow of a close approach when feeding. For this reason it is often passed by for one of the commoner marshland birds. If, however, we carry a pair of binoculars regularly we soon discover how generally the spoonbill occurs in suitable country.

In Holland, and elsewhere in Europe, the spoonbill builds its nest on the stumps of last year's reeds, only one or two feet above the water; with us, however, the bird makes its nursery on the tops of tall trees, as it did in England before, I believe, sometimes at the edge of a village tank, on other occasions in more remote parts, but invariably in well-watered areas. It breeds in colonies which may be large or consist of only one or two dozen pairs.

The breeding season is late, from the middle of August till the end of October. The nest is a large stick affair, with a considerable depression, and is usually lined with coarse grass. Three or four eggs are laid. These are white when fresh, with some sepia markings, but often become soiled from the mud adhering to the spoonbills feet after foraging expeditions.

To sit in a *hide*, with half a dozen spoonbills before one, less than fifteen feet away, is a thrilling experience. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young who are clothed in thick, white down and have the bill and legs flesh-coloured. The bill, though somewhat swollen, shows no signs of becoming spoon-shaped and is not yet unduly long in proportion to the size of the head. Like other 'blondes' the nestlings are affected by the heat. This probably accounts for one of the parents invariably standing over the young during the first ten or fourteen days of their lives, while the other is absent in search of food. The adult spoonbill's arrival at the nest is heralded by a great rush of wings accompanied by a grunt, a grunt different in tone from the asthmatic effort of the white ibis. The young, who indulge in much squealing and have for sometime been soliciting without success the other parent, now become even more vociferous. Soon their pressing demands for further rations



Photo by

E. H. N. Lowther

Spoonbill.
Platalea leucorodia Temm.

are met. The new arrival lowers its head and allows the young to help themselves, each in turn, to the tasties secreted at the base of the bill.

All the food is not delivered at once, but is given in two or three helpings, with a distinct interval between each. Occasionally it is dropped on to the floor of the nest. What its nature is I have not been able to ascertain, but it seemed to be 'very liquid.' A spoonbill I photographed dribbled all one very hot afternoon till I felt inclined to say, '*get away, old man, get away*'. Another spent a good half an hour spring-cleaning, again and again picking out something from the floor of the nest. This was thrown with a jerk over the shoulder, and as it left the tip of the long bill burst into a cloud of dust. A third, a male, occupied much of his time bringing beaks full of grass to the female. These were gratefully received by her and incorporated in the nest which contained three small young.

I have not photographed the small cormorant from a *hide*, the few pictures I possess of this species having been obtained by the method deprecated when dealing with the painted stork. There is therefore very little I have to say concerning its private life. Two or three dozen pairs may on occasion be found breeding in these small village heronries in company with white ibises, openbill storks and lesser and little egrets. Always they seem entirely engrossed in their own affairs and appear to find life well-worth living, judging by the gusto with which they shake themselves and flap their wings after feeding the young who, along with baby darters, are the timidest creatures I have come across. The diet given seems to consist entirely of small fry, more diminutive even than *chiltwa*.

In Kashmir, as in Britain, the grey heron builds in colonie's, but nowhere on the plains have I come across more than two nests of this species on a tree though it usually breeds in company with numbers of white ibises, spoonbills and other species, with whom, however, it does not otherwise concern itself. Always the very top of a high tree seems to be selected for the nest site so that photography from a *hide* is not an easy matter.

I was fortunate with a grey heron I once worked on as the camera was rather above the level of the nest; in consequence, instead of looking beyond on to a brazen sky, we are presented with a vista of fields and crops and distant trees. It was a particularly sticky day that I spent in the tent, and although I felt sorry for myself, for at one time I almost collapsed from suffocation, my sympathies were even more with the baby herons who could not have been more than three or four days old and felt the heat greatly during the old birds' absence. The young had been fed about half an hour before I went into hiding at 9, and were not visited again by either adult until 3-30 p.m. When, therefore, the female alighted at the edge of the nest, the young showed their annoyance at this long neglect by darting their bills savagely at the parent who, not to be intimidated, responded several times in like manner. Neither, however, touched the other. After a few minutes of this display of bad temper harmony reigned and the adult 'brought up' a number of tiny fry which were

deposited on the floor of the nest. Pieces were torn off these and given very tenderly to each of the three nestlings who, satisfied for the time being, were then shielded from the fierce heat by the mother bird standing between them and the sun, she even spreading out one wing to afford them greater ease. Later, two of the young ate on their own initiative, tearing off small pieces just as the parent had done. The third member of the family, rather smaller than the others, was again fed by the old heron. No attempt was made to give a whole fish, small though they were, to the young.

In the same tree was another grey heron's nest containing five young almost ready to fly. In addition to gasping with the heat they spent much of their time wandering about among the branches in the immediate vicinity of the nest, always, however, returning to their home as soon as they sighted either parent. Invariably the latter announced their return by calling *frank*. Once at the nest, the male and the female were immediately mobbed by their offspring, the young reaching up and 'stroking' the parent's bill—rather roughly at times, it must be admitted. I did not obtain the impression that as a result of this action they expected to have the food put into their hungry mouths; rather I felt they were helping the old bird to part with the meal—a number of small fish usually, and a frog as well on two occasions. One youngster seemed to take no part in 'stroking' the parent heron's bill: instead it kept its head well down in the nest while the *tamasha* was being enacted and was usually the first to make contact with the regurgitated food. Whether this was the reward of intelligence or of being the dullard of the family, its end was tragic. A veritable 'bun scramble' ensued as the food was dropped into the nest, everything being gulped whole. Once a large fish was brought up. The competition to obtain it was keen. In the end, however, it was knocked over the side of the nest. The young were very upset at having lost this treat, and as they gazed dismally down towards the ground below I laughed so incontinently that the old heron opened its wings in a hurry and left in alarm, uttering its familiar call as it departed.

Although common about *jhils* and marshy places the purple heron can quite easily be overlooked on account of the manner in which it 'freezes' when danger threatens or its haunts are invaded. There are records of this species making its home in trees, but the purple heron breeds normally in remote, dense reed beds, a number of reeds being bent over to form a platform as it were, on which the nest proper is built. This is of considerable size and is made of fine, thorny twigs wrenched from *babool* and other similar trees by the birds themselves. There is a fair depression to hold the three to five large light greenish-blue eggs, these often resting on pollen from bulrushes and 'cotton' from *sarpat* grass.

Only one breeding haunt of this species is known to me, and that confined to about twelve pairs of birds. The stagnant water in which the reed bed is situated was alive with leeches, and a miserable time my *shikari* and I had when erecting the sleeper crib from which the bird was eventually photographed, two or three of these scourges seeming to attach themselves to us for every one we succeeded in removing.

The purple heron sits closely, but is of an inquisitive disposition :



Photo by

Common Grey Heron.
Ardea cinerea Linn.

E. H. N. Lowther



Photo by

E. H. N. Lowther

Eastern Purple Heron
Ardea purpurea manillensis Blanf. & Oates.

which fact lead to my discovery of its breeding colony. A railway embankment rather overlooks the site in question, and while I was examining it through the field glasses, one long bill and neck, and then others, peered cautiously over the waving reed tops, the better to watch me. Very attenuated they were and by most people the birds would have been mistaken for the bulrushes surrounding them.

Young purple herons, like the young of the different species of bittern, wander about a great deal among the lower parts of the rushes during their parents' absence, probably in order to avoid the direct rays of the scorching sun. Invariably, however, they rush back to the nest on the arrival of the old birds. Great care should be exercised in approaching them as all are capable of inflicting serious wounds with their long, dagger-like bills. My *shikari* received a nasty gash in the hand from a young purple heron as a result of not exercising due caution.

The night heron appears to be distributed very irregularly. Round about Calcutta it is common, and almost every evening at dusk the bird may be seen as it makes its leisured way from its diurnal roosting haunts—usually quiet, well-timbered areas—to the feeding grounds, while its loud and far-reaching call—*quark*—is familiar to all bird lovers. In other parts of Bengal too the species is general, as also it is in many districts in Bihar. In Delhi I used to see it regularly about the public gardens at nightfall; but in those parts of the United Provinces with which I am best acquainted the night heron is decidedly rare, and I cannot remember having found a single nesting colony there.

When stationed at Dhanbad in the Manbhūm district, Bihar, the opportunities afforded of watching this species were legion as about eighteen pairs established a breeding colony in my garden. Nest construction commenced with the setting in of the south-west monsoon, both sexes helping to build the nest which was constructed from fine twigs torn from neighbouring trees. The nests, which were somewhat flimsily constructed, were invariably well shaded and never contained more than three light greeny-blue eggs each. Both the male and the female were seen to incubate, and the nestlings were clad in long scraggy hairs of a shade I failed to note and which I cannot now remember.

The young were fed at long, irregular intervals during the day, but it was at sundown, and throughout the night and early morning, that their appetites were chiefly catered for. The noise that they made when hungry or being fed—*chick-chick-chick*, repeated time and again—had to be heard to be believed. Many a sleepless hour we spent on their account, but as we listened to the chattering my wife and I could visualise exactly what was happening in the tree tops.

The stench at a nesting colony is appalling because of the decaying fish and other animal matter that falls from the nests, and it speaks volumes for our love of birds that we allowed the night herons to return year after year to breed with us.

About five miles from our 'house on the hill' was another nesting